

# *Toxic Homes:*

*Exposure to indoor toxins in Bushwick*



*A report by Make the Road New York*

*December 2009*

## ***TOXIC HOMES: ABOUT THE REPORT***

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Bushwick is a low-income, predominantly Latino and African-American neighborhood located in North Brooklyn, New York City. Bushwick residents face a number of major environmental health problems that are caused by bad indoor housing conditions. Because of exposure to lead paint in people's homes, there are extremely high levels of lead poisoning in the community.<sup>i</sup> Also, because of the high incidence of asthma triggers, such as cockroaches, mice, rats and mold, there is a high incidence of asthma in Bushwick. The NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH) has recently found that Bushwick and the neighboring community Williamsburg have asthma rates four times the average of NYC.<sup>ii</sup>

In addition to these health problems, concern is rising over the use of indoor pesticides by landlords and tenants in Bushwick. Studies show that exposure to pesticides can cause negative long lasting health problems, and exacerbate other health problems such as asthma, especially for children.<sup>iii</sup> Frequently used household sprays and foggers often contain ingredients such as fipronil and permethrin, both of which are linked to causing headaches, nausea, and skin irritations.<sup>iv</sup> A recent study by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) suggests that the residue of these pesticides linger in homes, continually exposing people and young children to the risks attached to these chemicals.<sup>v</sup> Furthermore, the EPA classifies permethrin as a possible human carcinogen.<sup>vi</sup>

The New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (NYCDHMH) advocates for the use of Integrated Pest Management (IPM)<sup>vii</sup>, a more holistic approach that seeks to address the root causes of pest infestations and limit the use of strong chemicals in the home. In 2005 the City passed Local Law 37 in an effort to curb the use of pesticides in city properties. Local Law 37 emphasizes the use of IPM strategies and also promotes the surveillance and reporting of pesticide use in these properties.<sup>viii</sup> This same procedure of tracking and recording the use of pesticides should be applied to all our New York City homes and communities to ensure safe and healthy housing.

In order to learn how to best address the extensive problem of indoor toxins in people's homes in Bushwick, in the Fall of 2009, Make the Road NY conducted 120 surveys and interviews in the community and compiled this report. "Toxic Homes" reveals that Bushwick residents are exposed to high incidences of pests and pesticides in their homes. We

show that current city regulations fail to hold negligent landlords accountable for making necessary repairs in people's homes. We also find that while community members are overwhelmingly interested learning less toxic and more effective approaches, such as IPM, to controlling pests besides pesticides, they currently lack the educational resources to implement these safer practices. We conclude our report by recommending that community groups and the DOHMH provide greater education for tenants about IPM alternatives and that the City should create enforceable regulations for indoor asthma triggers.

## ***ABOUT MAKE THE ROAD NEW YORK***

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Make the Road NY is a membership-led organization. MRNY promotes economic justice and participatory democracy by increasing low-income people's power to achieve self-determination through collective action. Its multi-faceted approach includes:

***Organizing and Activism*** to build a stronger community, to make governing institutions subject to democratic community control, and to mobilize resistance to oppression based on race, class, gender, age, national origin, and sexual orientation.

***Collaborative Learning*** to share ideas and experiences, to analyze the root causes of the problems, and to strategize about how to take action together to resolve these problems in a way that values the voice, perspective and contribution of every person.

***A Community of Support*** to provide badly needed services to members and leaders, to draw people into our educational and organizing activities, and to affirm an ethic of cooperation, mutual support, dignity and *animo*.

## ***ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS***

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We would like to thank all of the community members that participated in this study, especially Eymy Meza and Griselda Valencia for their help in conducting surveys. We would also like to thank Matthew Chachere from the Northern Manhattan Improvement Corporation, Ericka Stallings from the New York Immigration Coalition, Edward Fishkin from Woodhull Hospital, and Nancy Clark from the DOHMH for their advice and expertise in compiling this report.

## ***ABOUT THE SURVEY***

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The residents who participated in this survey all live in apartments in the Bushwick area. The 120 participants in this study were chosen at random from both members of MRNY and other members of the community.

The goal of our survey was to highlight:

- Current bad conditions that exist in residents' homes and the connection to the use of indoor toxins
- Use of pesticides and other indoor toxins in the community
- Community knowledge about alternative use to pesticides
- Community commitment to learning more about effective alternatives to pesticide use

## **Significant Findings**

Out of the 120 people surveyed, we found that:

- **85%** live with one or more of these conditions: cockroaches, mice, rats, mold
- **60%** use pesticides or other indoor toxins (such as bleach) in their homes
- **26%** think it is safe to use pesticides
- **only 18%** have heard have of alternatives to pesticide use
- **88%** would like to learn more about Integrated Pest management (IPM)

## ***ABOUT OUR FINDINGS:***

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### *Unhealthy Environments:*

Our study confirms that many residents in Bushwick continue to live with unhealthy conditions. Cockroaches, mice, rats and mold are all health risks and asthma triggers. **85% of the residents surveyed live with one or more of these conditions.** Landlords in the neighborhood have not done enough to make the necessary repairs or to improve conditions in a way that targets the roots causes of these problems. Even after **54% of residents informed their landlord that they were living with asthma triggers,** the problems persist. Furthermore, HPD has done little to hold these landlords accountable. Out of the **19% of survey participants that called 311,** none of their landlords nor the City has repaired the deplorable conditions in their homes.

### *Use of Pesticides:*

Importantly, we find that these conditions also cause an over-reliance on pesticide use and other indoor toxins. Although many of the residents acknowledge that pesticide use may not be safe for their health, **60% of residents use pesticides in their homes.** They report that they use a wide array of sprays, foggers, powders, gels and other products to deal with pest problems in their homes.

Many of the pesticides used are common brand household products that contain fipronil and permethrin, considered to be health risks, like Raid or Combat Quick Roach Killing Gel. Others reported using illegal products such as Tres Pasitos and tiza china (“Chinese chalk”)ix. Most people who use pesticides report using a wide array of products found in their neighborhood stores, without noticing what brand they were buying. Many rely on word of mouth by others in the community of what works the most effectively. Most residents with pervasive mold problems report relying on strong detergents such as bleach to try and alleviate the problem.

### *Lack of community education:*

Over 70% of residents surveyed say that they do not think that using pesticides in their homes is safe. While the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene officially advocates for the use of IPM in homes, **less than 20%** of residents have heard of alternatives to pesticide use.

There is also still under reporting of bad conditions to both landlords and HPD. From the conversations had with tenants while conducting surveys, many residents claim that they fear retaliation from their landlords if they report these conditions or ask for repairs. Others do not

realize that their landlords are responsible for repairing these conditions and that HPD is supposed to enforce these repairs.

*Community Interest in IPM:*

Although few residents currently use IPM measures, **88% of the community members in our study would like to learn more about IPM**. This indicates that there are opportunities for community education about IPM.

## ***2 CASE STUDIES ON PESTICIDES IN THE COMMUNITY***



Luisa Mejia points to a hole in her bedroom from where mice enter her apartment

### **Luisa Mejia**

Luisa Mejia is a long time resident of Bushwick. She has been living in her apartment at 1406 Putnam Ave. for 20 years. Her apartment is plagued with cockroaches, mice and extreme cases of mold. Luisa, her son and her grandchildren all suffer from severe asthma. The conditions in her apartment exacerbate their asthma conditions.

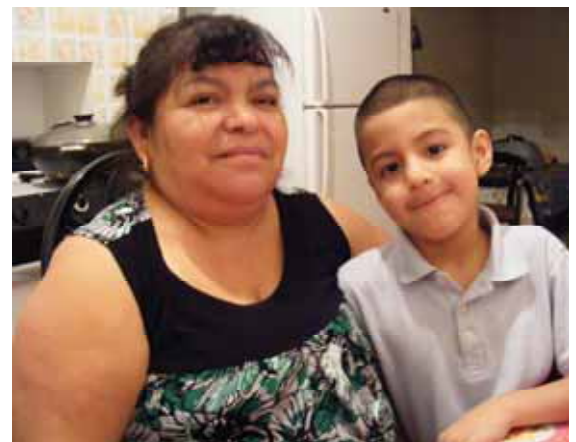
Because her landlord has refused to make necessary repairs in her apartment for many years, Luisa used to use many pesticides and other toxins in her home to try and deal with the bad conditions. She used sprays and foggers in her home, and also cleaning agents like beaches to deal with the mold. Luisa had to once take her asthmatic son to the emergency room after using bleach in her home.

Recently, Luisa entered the Asthma Program and learned about alternatives to using pesticides in her house. She is currently in a court case with her landlord to force him to repair her bad conditions.

### **Agustina Crisantos**

Agustina Crisantos lives at 298 Jefferson St. with her 2 children and grandchild. For 2 years, MRNY has supported Agustina in her fight for better housing conditions against a landlord who has been reluctant to make any repairs. Her landlord has essentially abandoned her building. At one point recently, Agustina's home had 160 HPD violations, including lead-paint on the walls.

Because of these deplorable conditions, Agustina has reverted to using commonly bought spray pesticides to deal with cockroaches and other pest problems in her home. She is interested in learning about how to use IPM measures to better control the pests in her apartment.



Agustina Crisantos and her grandson, Johnny Hernandez, 6 years old.



## ***RECOMMENDATIONS:***

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### **Improved Education about Preventing Exposure to Toxins**

Community organizations like Make the Road NY (MRNY) should deepen their education of community residents about how to reduce their exposure to indoor toxins. For the past 3 years, MRNY has educated the community about IPM measures and asthma prevention through its Asthma Home Visit program. Out of the 180 participants in the program, 68% of the participants have reported that after having participated in our program for at least six months their asthma symptoms have decreased. MRNY plans to expand its home visit program and conduct extensive outreach to local daycares, schools, and churches about how to create more healthy homes.

The Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DHMH) should also launch a more extensive public educational campaign about how to reduce indoor toxins. Specifically, community residents have found that there are few public announcements about the dangers of pesticides and the advantages of using Integrated Pest Management (IPM) methods. A brochure on mold hazards, pest problems and proper correction should be provided to tenants and owners, particularly when violations are cited. In addition, the DHMH should more widely publicize about its IPM services for asthmatic residents in Bushwick.

### **Stronger Housing Regulation to Prevent Indoor Asthma Triggers and Pesticide Use**

Many MRNY members spend years in court with their landlords trying to get them to repair mold and abate cockroach and mice violations. They have found that current city laws are not strong enough to force negligent landlords to repair these conditions. We believe that if the City is able to get landlords to reduce indoor asthma triggers then pesticide use will also decrease in the community.

We believe that the City Council should pass Intro:750, The Asthma Free Housing Act. This bill would create enforceable regulations for safe work practices to remove indoor asthma triggers. This Act calls on HPD and the DOHMH to create guidelines for appropriate mold remediation that should be codified as enforceable regulations in the City's Health Code, similar to the Health Code provisions governing safe abatement of lead-based paint hazards. DHMH should enforce safe mold and pest management, and require that landlords employ HPD-certified IPM practitioners for pest problems. The law would also require landlords who have entered in Voluntary Repair Agreements with the Department of Anti-Abandonment, and those whose buildings house asthmatics, to use IPM for pest problems.

HPD should also implement a stronger response to housing problems. HPD should re-classify all housing code violations for pest infestation as “immediately hazardous” (“Class C”) violations. The code violation should be written to require that landlords use IPM procedures. The HPD code violation for mold and pest problems should require in a written notice that a) the underlying causes of the conditions be corrected, and b) the work be performed in accordance with procedures specified in the Health Code, as above. The law would also require owners to certify that pest infestations and mold hazards were corrected using appropriate practices and personnel, including the correction of underlying defects.

Lastly, HPD inspectors, landlords, supers, and practitioners should be trained to identify mold hazards as well as the underlying defects that cause them. HPD should also provide training and certification in IPM.

## ***APPENDIX:***

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### **Toxic Risks Initiative Survey – Make the Road NY**

#### ***Indoor Asthma Triggers***

- Which of the following conditions exist in your apartment?

☐ Cockroaches   ☐ Mice   ☐ Rats   ☐ Mold

If these conditions exist:

- Have you informed your landlord about these conditions? ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Have you called 311? ☐ Yes   ☐ No

If so:

- Did a City inspector come to your home? ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Do you use strong smelling cleaning agents such as bleach to clean mold?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Does your landlord use strong smelling cleaning agents such as bleach to clean mold?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No

#### ***Pesticide Exposure***

- Do you use pesticides in your home? ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- If so, what type of pesticides do you use?

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- Do you think it is safe to use these pesticides? ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Does your landlord spray pesticides in your apt? ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Do you know what they use?

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#### ***Integrated Pest Management (IPM) Knowledge***

- Would you like to learn how to control pests by using fewer pesticides? ☐ Yes   ☐ No
- Have you ever heard of any effective alternatives to pesticide use (Integrated Pest Management)?  
☐ Yes   ☐ No

- (Integrated Pest Management is a less toxic, holistic approach to pest control that can have measurable benefits, particularly for asthmatics)
- If so, what are they?
- Has your landlord fixed leaks and holes in your apartment? ☐ Yes ☐ No
- Did you know that in Bushwick the Health Department has a program to do Integrated Pest Management in apartments where asthmatics live? ☐ Yes ☐ No

### ***Asthma Condition (If there is an asthmatic in the family)***

- Do you or does someone that lives with you have asthma? ☐ Yes ☐ No

**Respond to the following questions only if you responded “yes” above:**

- How many times a week do you (or the asthmatic family member) get asthma symptoms (such as tightness of chest, wheezing, or coughing)?  
☐ Less than once a week ☐ 2 or more times a week ☐ almost everyday ☐ constantly
- In the last 3 months, how many times have you (or the asthmatic family member) missed school or work because of his/her asthma?  
 \_\_\_\_\_
- In the last 3 months, how many times have you (or the asthmatic family member) visited the emergency room or had an emergency visit with their doctor because of asthma?  
 \_\_\_\_\_

### ***Personal Information***

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Age \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity \_\_\_\_\_

Gender \_\_\_\_\_

## End Notes

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<sup>i</sup> “If Walls Could Talk: How Landlords Fail to Obey Childhood Lead Poisoning Prevention in Bushwick,” A Report by New York City Coalition to End Lead Poisoning and Make the Road NY, July 2009

<sup>ii</sup> This figure is based on the admission rate (per 100, 000 people) of hospitalization for adult asthmatics. Source: NYCDOHMH: *Community Health Profiles: The Health of Bushwick and Williamsburg* 2003.

<sup>iii</sup> P J Landrigan, L Claudio, S B Markowitz, G S Berkowitz, B L Brenner, H Romero, J G Wetmur, T D Matte, A C Gore, J H Godbold, and M S Wolff. Pesticides and Inner-City Children: Exposures, Risks and Prevention. *Environmental Health Perspect.* 1999 June; 107(Suppl 3): 431–437.

<sup>iv</sup> Glaser, Aviva. “Common Pesticide Poisons Homes – Insecticides Said to Degrade Rapidly Show Persistence.” Article by Beyond Pesticides/National Coalition Against the Misuse of Pesticides

<sup>v</sup> EPA and US Department of Housing and Urban Development. “American Healthy Homes Survey: A National Study of Residential Pesticides Measured from Floor Wipes,” *Environ. Sci. Technol.*, 2009, 43 (12), pp 4294–4300

<sup>vi</sup> US EPA. 2002. List of Chemicals Evaluated for Carcinogenic Potential. Office of Pesticide Programs. Washington, DC; Cox, C. 1998. Permethrin. *Journal of Pesticide Reform* 18(2): 14-205

<sup>vii</sup> [www.ipmcenters.org/IPMsymposiumV/sessions/50-3.pdf](http://www.ipmcenters.org/IPMsymposiumV/sessions/50-3.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> [www.healthystates.csg.org/NR/rdonlyres/AEE07212-CF69-494A-893F-BF8CB08BBD93/0/PresentationDanielKassEPHT.pdf](http://www.healthystates.csg.org/NR/rdonlyres/AEE07212-CF69-494A-893F-BF8CB08BBD93/0/PresentationDanielKassEPHT.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> [www.epa.gov/pesticides/health/illegalproducts](http://www.epa.gov/pesticides/health/illegalproducts)